



Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West

By John Ralston Saul

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The Western world is full of paradoxes. We talk endlessly of individual freedom, yet we’ve never been under more pressure to conform. Our business leaders describe themselves as capitalists, yet most are corporate employees and financial speculators. We call our governments democracies, yet few of us participate in politics. We complain about invasive government, yet our legal, educational, financial, social, cultural and legislative systems are deteriorating.

All these problems, John Ralston Saul argues, are largely the result of our blind faith in the value of reason. Over the past 400 years, our “rational elites” have turned the modern West into a vast, incomprehensible, directionless machine, run by process-minded experts—“Voltaire’s bastards”—whose cult of scientific management is empty of both sense and morality. Whether in politics, art, business, the military, entertainment, science, finance, academia or journalism, these experts share the same outlook and methods. The result, Saul maintains, is a civilization of immense technological power whose ordinary citizens are increasingly excluded from the decision-making process.

In this wide-ranging anatomy of modern society and its origins—whose “pages explode with insight, style and intellectual rigor” (Camille Paglia, *The Washington Post*)—Saul presents a shattering critique of the political, economic and cultural establishments of the West.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Known for his novels of international intrigue, Saul in his first work of nonfiction delivers a passionate jeremiad on the follies of our age. Reason, he argues, has run amok; instead of the enlightened utopia envisaged by Voltaire, the modern West is a soulless machine run by technocratic elites that promise efficiency but create disasters. The author targets the insane waste of our "permanent war economy," the perils of nuclear power, the co-optation of democracy by vested interests, the news media's focus on false events and manufactured celebrities, the "personality politics" of presidential campaigns. He critiques the Harvard Business School's management teachings, profiles such figures as Thomas Jefferson, Robert McNamara and Charles de Gaulle, flunks our colleges for failure to reward creativity and imagination. He blames novelists from James Joyce onward for "rendering literature inaccessible" and divorcing fiction from social concerns. He roams freely through history, politics, theology, art and film, challenging his audience on every page. This wonderfully provocative inquiry, a work of bold sweep and originality, may nonetheless leave some readers wondering whether misplaced faith in reason underlies all the ills discussed.

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From Library Journal

Saul locates the source of many of the contemporary world's problems in a perversion of reason. He argues that while Voltaire had hoped to use reason as a tool to overthrow outmoded and harsh customs, his successors instead employed reason as an instrument of social control. The will of the people was unimportant to such acolytes of reason as Napoleon, who argued that uninformed popular opinion must be regimented through the supposed dictates of reason. The result of these misguided efforts at rational planning have been the horrors of modern warfare and the depredations of industrialism. Saul attributes such varied phenomena as the arms race, the "star system," and the rise of bureaucracy to hyperrationalism. Saul, a popular novelist (*The Paradise Eater* , LJ 11/1/88), has a vivid style that makes his book enjoyable reading, but a clear sense of what he means by reason never emerges. Is it anything more than a catchphrase for whatever the author dislikes?-- David Gordon, Bowling Green State Univ., Ohio

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About the Author

John Ralston Saul is the International President of PEN International, an essayist, novelist, and long-time champion of freedom of expression. His works have been translated into twenty-three languages in thirty countries, are widely taught in universities, and central to the debate over contemporary society in many countries. They include the philosophical trilogy: *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, *The Doubter's Companion*, *The Unconscious Civilization*, and its conclusion, *On Equilibrium*. In *The Collapse of Globalism*, he predicted today's economic crisis. In the autumn of 2012, he published his first novel in fifteen years, *Dark Diversions: A Traveller's Tale*, a picaresque novel about the life of modern nouveaux riches.

His awards include South Korea's Manhae Grand Prize for Literature, the Pablo Neruda Medal, Canada's Governor General's Literary Award for Nonfiction, the inaugural Gutenberg Galaxy Award for Literature, and Italy's Premio Letterario Internazionale. He is a Companion in the Order of Canada and a Chevalier in the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France. He is the recipient of seventeen honorary degrees.

Users Review

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